

## Birds have amazing survival skills

Waterfowl have an incredible ability to survive and avoid harsh weather conditions. They migrate hundreds of miles south to a warmer climate for the winter where food is abundant, or simply endure the harsh winter weather in northern areas. Many species of migratory and resident waterfowl spend the winter in Rhode Island. For all waterfowl, the abundance of naturally occurring food and the quality of their diet are the main driving forces behind the birds' ability to survive.



### Food quality is critical

Waterfowl require proper nutrition to survive New England winters. The diet of a young bird during its first year of life must be high in essential fats, proteins and nutrients to ensure proper development. Adults need a nutrient rich diet in order to replace feathers, and recondition their bodies after migration and during breeding cycles. People unknowingly harm waterfowl by hand feeding food that is low in nutritional value.

### High nutrition foods include:

Insects,  
Grasses, and

Submerged Aquatic Plants



### Low nutrition foods include:

Bread,  
Crackers,  
Popcorn, and  
Pastries



## Problems associated with feeding waterfowl include:



- ◇ Malnutrition
- ◇ Disease
- ◇ Environmental degradation
- ◇ Dependency
- ◇ Water pollution

Each problem is described below in detail.



### 1. Malnutrition

Through evolution wildlife species have developed skills to obtain food that contains the essential nutrients needed to survive, reproduce and live a healthy life. These skills help maintain a balance between animals and their natural habitat. This balance is compromised by hand feeding, which is physically harmful to birds and is one of the primary causes of malnutrition. Malnutrition is caused by the types of food that people hand feed to the birds. Foods such as bread and crackers don't provide the necessary energy and nutrients for proper health, and energy is wasted in digesting these foods. Birds become dependent upon humans because more poor quality foods are needed to make up the difference.

#### Malnutrition leads to:

- ◇ Low energy and muscle deterioration.
- ◇ Development of deformed wings in young birds.
- ◇ Loss of flight later in life.
- ◇ Lowered ability to avoid predation.
- ◇ Decrease in successful reproduction.
- ◇ Lowered life expectancy.



## 2. Dependency

Waterfowl, particularly Canada geese and mallards, will congregate in areas with abundant food and space. Unfortunately, hand feeding can cause birds to become concentrated in small urban areas that are incapable of supporting large numbers of birds. The birds then become dependent upon humans for food and can become nuisance animals. Some species, particularly mute swans, can become aggressive and may need to be removed.

#### Dependence upon humans for food causes:

- ◇ Loss of their natural fear of humans, which creates aggressive behavior.
- ◇ Concentration of birds near highways and airports, potentially causing motor vehicle and airplane accidents.
- ◇ Overpopulation of small wetlands and ponds.
- ◇ Delay or halting of migration to natural wintering sites.



## 3. Disease

Lowered nutrition and overpopulation allow disease to spread more quickly, potentially infecting thousands of birds with fatal diseases such as Avian Cholera, Duck Plague, Avian Influenza and Avian Botulism. Although these diseases have always existed in waterfowl populations, the risks increase when bird populations become concentrated at feeding sites.



## 4. Environmental degradation

Waterfowl naturally congregate in wetlands, when and where natural foods are plentiful. However, when hand feeding occurs, the over-concentration of birds may ultimately cause overgrazing and degradation to the landscape.

High concentrations of birds cause:

- ◆ Overgrazing of vegetation leading to soil erosion.
- ◆ Degradation of the landscape making it undesirable for other species and unsightly for humans.
- ◆ Unsanitary conditions due to large quantities of bird feces.



## 5. Water pollution

People will often feed ducks or swans at the local pond, or gulls at the beach. This not only causes a nuisance situation with birds begging for and stealing food, but also contributes significantly to water pollution in the form of **fecal coliform bacteria**. High levels of fecal coliform bacteria in the water cause beach closures and the prohibition of shellfishing in certain areas. This pollution directly affects the enjoyment of our local waters and impairs the livelihood of local shellfishermen.

Feeding the birds can:

- ◆ Cause gulls to be a nuisance by begging and stealing food and garbage.
- ◆ Contribute to beach closures.
- ◆ Contribute to the prohibition of shellfishing in coastal areas.



## What can you do to help?

### Don't feed waterfowl or gulls!

Waterfowl will take food that is easily available, even if the food is unhealthy. It is better for the health of both the birds and the environment to not feed geese, ducks, swans and gulls.

#### When people feed waterfowl

- ◆ Waterfowl can become concentrated in small urban environments that are not capable of supporting large flocks.
- ◆ Waterfowl may become malnourished and risks of disease increase.
- ◆ Birds can become nuisance animals at feeding sites and other areas where they congregate.
- ◆ Unnatural concentrations of waterfowl can cause overgrazing and erosion, which may be undesirable for other species.
- ◆ High concentrations of fecal coliform bacteria contribute to unsanitary conditions and to closures of beaches and shellfish beds.

For more information please call:



Rhode Island Department of  
Environmental Management.



[www.state.ri.us/DEM/](http://www.state.ri.us/DEM/)

Waterfowl questions? Contact:  
Division of Fish and Wildlife (401) 789-0281

Water quality concerns? Contact:  
Office of Water Resources (401) 222-4700

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# 5 REASONS WHY FEEDING WATERFOWL IS HARMFUL



PHOTO: GLEN SMART / USFWS

People often feed waterfowl. Sometimes people can be seen feeding gulls, geese, ducks or swans at local beaches or ponds. What they might not realize is that feeding these animals is detrimental to the birds and the environment in many significant ways. Please read on to learn more about the harmful effects of hand feeding waterfowl.